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Theron Schmidt, “‘We’re People Who Do Shows’: Back to Back Theatre: Performance, Politics, Visibility, Edited by Helena Grehan and Peter Eckersall’, *TDR: The Drama Review*, 59.1 (2015), 190–92  
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*“We’re People Who Do Shows”: Back to Back Theatre - Performance Politics Visibility*. Edited by Helena Grehan and Peter Eckersall. Aberystwyth, UK: Performance Research Books, 2013; 284 pp.; illustrations. £33.50 paper.

An emerging feature of European theatre of the new millennium has been the appearance within “postdramatic” or non-narrative theatre frameworks of performers marked by apparent difference from those who are normally represented, a trend that might be described as “outsider theatre.” A few prominent examples include: the Swiss actors with learning and mental disabilities in *Disabled Theater* (2012) by Jérôme Bel/Theater HORA; the young children performing versions of themselves in work such as Tim Etchells’s *That Night Follows Day* (2007) and Gob Squad’s *Before Your Very Eyes* (2011) (both collaborations with the Flemish organization Campo); and the diverse panoply of bodies on display in the work of Romeo Castellucci and Societas Raffaello Sanzio. It is in this context that Australian company Back to Back, who describe themselves as “an ensemble of eight actors perceived to have intellectual disabilities,” has rightly gained international acclaim with striking and provocative works such as *small metal objects* (2005), *Food Court* (2008), and *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich* (2012). And yet, while the company’s work certainly resonates with this current trend, it is also rooted in the shifting relationships and individual strengths of this creative ensemble, drawing on trust and expertise developed over a history of nearly 30 years. This new volume from Performance Research Books testifies to this distinctive history, drawing on the voices and personalities of the company and its collaborators as well as offering a range of critical perspectives from outside scholars. Critical essays, in-depth interviews, a rich selection of photographs, and full playscripts of recent productions are carefully interwoven in what the volume’s co-editors describe as a “dramaturgical” structure that “expresses the artistic sensibilities of the company’s work” (20): as with the company’s theatrical work, text, image, and idea are mutually supportive, and no single voice or perspective is given final authority.

An interview with some of the company’s early artistic directors and collaborators locates the origins of Back to Back in disability outreach services in the 1980s, when a policy emphasis on “deinstitutionalization” favored initiatives that might be expected “to alter the lives of people with disability and ‘normalize’ them” (30). Yet its initial directors quite consciously chose to place the work within aesthetic rather than vocational or service frameworks, and the company has continued on this trajectory with its current artistic director, Bruce Gladwin. Indeed, references to “disability” are pointedly absent from this collection’s title, and the company’s descriptions of itself similarly shift the focus away from disability toward the perspective their theatre might offer on wider culture: “Back to Back is uniquely placed to comment on the social, cultural, ethical and value-based structures that define the institution known as ‘the majority’” (220).

And yet, how can one approach this theatre without also approaching the subject of disability? The question of what it is to be perceived as disabled is inextricably bound up in both the ideas this work addresses and the company’s material processes of making. Indeed, that carefully modulated phrase from the company’s self-description – “perceived to have intellectual disabilities” – gets right to the crux of the issue: again and again, as spectators or collaborators, people who encounter Back to Back’s work find themselves reflecting on issues of perception, mediation, and visibility, and these are recurrent themes throughout this collection. Eddie Paterson surveys the company’s work in relation to shifting ideas of text and textuality in contemporary theatre, writing that *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich* “makes the process of ‘writing’ visible and shows that hierarchical notions of power inherent in language are debatable” (82). Barry Laing offers an honest and revealing account of his own

presuppositions as a visiting artist invited to work with the company's summer school; the challenge, as he puts it, was not to impose his ideas but instead to find a way "to step into the image of a particular culture" embodied by the participants in the workshop (88). Helena Grehan describes the way *Food Court* works to "unravel any firm position the spectator may occupy" (112), such that the work is "not about the disabled other or disability per se but about how each of us responds to the other and at the same time acknowledges (or hides from) our own prejudices" (109). And a particularly acute critique of spectacle, co-written by Bryoni Trezise and Caroline Wake, describes Back to Back's work as inviting the audience "to undertake an act of double or triple perception: to perceive perceived disability as it were, rather than simply disability" (120). Through these varied approaches, then, the essays in this collection offer a unique contribution to disability studies, mediated by questions of perception and visibility. As Richard Gough puts it in an interview with Gladwin, "Whose disability is being perceived? Is the disability one of perception?" (246).

Alongside these and other critical essays, a wide selection of other resources provides insight and background to the company's work. The lengthy interview with Gladwin reveals, among other things, how each new work has developed out of issues that arose during the creation and performance of the previous piece. For example, *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich* is a direct riposte to audience members of *Food Court* who said they did not believe these particular actors could have been capable of devising work as complicated as this (246). For many commentators, the unsettling effects of Back to Back's work is exemplified by the resulting meta-theatrical scene in *Ganesh*, in which some of the actors, playing brutal parodies of themselves, argue about whether their fellow actors are capable of understanding the implications of the themes they are representing. It is a moment in which the line between reality and artifice is blurred – a moment that establishes "a zone of uncertainty" for the audience, as Grehan writes (204). Yoni Prior offers a "behind the scenes" glimpse of the devising process for this scene, and one might think that this perspective could offer some relief from the anxieties raised by this moment, showing some critical separation between the real and the fictional. However, no such relief is offered; instead, as Prior writes, "everyone lost the reality line in this improvisation" (211). Above all, the sense that this collection gives about the company is that over 27 years they have become comfortable inhabiting a realm in which it is not always possible to distinguish the theatrical from the real, the constructed from the factual. This theatre might be made out of the "real" circumstances of the lives of the ensemble members, but, more significantly, the reverse is also true: theatre, with all its ambiguity, care, and risk, has become a way of making a life. As the company states in a collaboratively written declaration, "We are not afraid to step into the cold, dark side. [...] We go deep into the work" (11). They identify themselves not by their perceived differences, but instead, as they put it in another ensemble statement that lends the collection its title, "We're people who do shows."